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ABSTRACT

The Benton Foundation commissioned a study that reviewed the literature, convened four focus groups, and surveyed 1,000 male and female voters by telephone to determine public opinion about the role of government in providing new communications technologies. Results indicated that Americans want government to have an active role in the debate over new communications technologies, and what they want most are educational and informational services. People are not very interested in having 500 cable channels or in-home shopping, but they are interested in interactive college courses and computer libraries. A majority of Americans favor government taking an active role in addressing access, knowledge, and cost. Most people who were surveyed favored government grants to make new technologies available, and they thought that the government should require those who profit from new technologies to dedicate some of their profits to community uses and community access to government information. Government should take the leading role in ensuring access, providing needed education, and keeping costs down. Contains a list of seven Communications Policy Working Papers available from the Benton Foundation. (SLD)

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Communications Policy Briefing

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What People Think About New Communications Technologies

Americans clearly want government to have an active role in the emerging debate over communications technologies. They want government to be a leader in helping these technologies evolve, in ensuring universal access, and in keeping the public interest uses of the new communications technologies in the forefront. They also support a variety of actions on behalf of the public interest from government grants to corporate donations.

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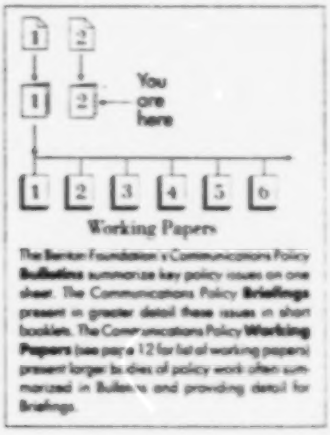
This briefing summarizes research on public opinion about emerging communications technologies. The Benton Foundation commissioned Mellman Lazarus Lake to review the literature, convene four focus groups in Baltimore, Maryland, and—in conjunction with the Tarrance Group—conduct a nationwide survey of 1,000 men and women voters. The survey was a telephone poll of likely voters chosen at random to represent the American electorate. Respondents were asked seven questions about the government's role in providing new communications technologies and additional demographic questions. The survey results have a margin of error of ±3.1 percentage points.

This research is a first step toward understanding people's attitudes about advances in communications technology and government's role promoting those advances. Much corporate research in this area has focused on short-term market-oriented questions. The research here adds a layer of understanding to existing knowledge, but several questions remain unanswered. Two areas of research touched on here, but in need of further research, are people's view of the communications debate in the area of health care and people's attitudes about how to pay for the information superhighway.

The Benton Foundation is working to involve nonprofits in shaping the National Information Infrastructure. Benton has created the Communications Policy Project with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to strengthen public interest advocacy in communications policy.

The Communications Policy Project promotes public interest values and noncommercial services for the National Information Infrastructure through research, policy analysis, print and video publishing, and outreach to nonprofits and foundations.



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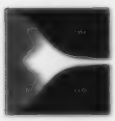
Communications Policy Briefing 2

What People Think about New Communications Technologies

Mellman Lazarus Lake



Benton Foundation
Washington, DC

Key messages and findings

What the American public most desires from the new communications technologies are educational and informational services. People are not all that interested in 500-channel capabilities or in home shopping. But they are very interested in interactive college courses and computer libraries.

A strong majority of Americans support government's taking an active role in addressing issues of access, knowledge, and cost to make these services universal. One of the reasons is that they do not want to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. They also want to keep the public interest in this debate. And they want government to help the technology evolve, to make sure that it is universally accessible and affordable, and to promote applications in education and health care.

The support for government action across the electorate is wide and strong. Importantly, younger blue collar men are surprisingly interested in this issue. They are partial to technology and worried about their job skills and their children's education.

Here are the highlights from a nationwide survey of 1,000 voters:

- Government should provide grants to help communities and nonprofit groups make new technologies available in schools, libraries, and hospitals (77% support, 18% oppose).

- Government should require companies that profit from the new technologies to dedicate a part of their resources to supporting community uses and community access to government information (76% support, 18% oppose).

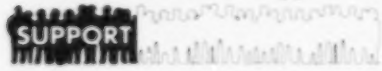
- Government should support education programs that adults can use from home over a computer or two-way television—or that children can use to help them with their homework (70% support, 25% oppose).

- Government should ensure that a nationwide information system will be accessible to everyone in every part of the country (67% support, 26% oppose).

- Government should provide information to teach people about the new technologies and how to use them (64% support, 31% oppose).

- Government should set costs for services cheaply enough for everyone to afford (56% support, 36% oppose).

- Government should not allow communications companies to raise subscriber rates today to enable them to invest in services for the future (58% oppose raising rates, 33% support).



Education before Entertainment

Educational and information services most popular

The American public wants the information superhighway to be more than games, videos, and home shopping. The most popular multimedia services are educational and informational services. A strong majority (59%) gives the highest possible rating (5 on a scale of 1 to 5) to the idea of interactive educational programs that allow people to attend classes from home—and 56%, to the idea of home access to libraries (MCI survey, January 1994). The preference for these services eclipses that for the services getting the most media attention—such as on-demand video catalogs (39%), 500-channel capability (24%), or home shopping (22%).

Striking preference over entertainment

The preference for educational and informational services over entertainment services is striking. Interestingly, the same has been true of television, with people disliking much of television's entertainment, but lauding its information and news. By a 53 percent to 31 percent margin, respondents believe television and movies are a bad, rather than good, influence on the country (Times Mirror survey, May 1992). And by 49 percent to 39 percent, people believe that television has had a negative effect on children (Gallup survey, September 1992). Eighty-two percent have a favorable opinion of television news and a favorable view of CNN (Times Mirror survey, January 1992).

More technology in schools

People want to spend more on computer research and on improving technology in schools to prepare children for future jobs. People overwhelmingly believe that computers and technology are a good influence on the country (87 percent) (Times Mirror survey, May 1992). They believe we should spend more on computer research (58 percent, including 22 percent who want to spend a lot more) and want the government to increase spending to help businesses develop such technology as computer chips (53 percent) (Louis Harris survey, March 1992). In addition, 54 percent believe that a lack of up-to-date equipment and computers is a serious problem in the public schools, and 24 percent believe it is a very serious problem (Louis Harris survey, August 1992). More than three-quarters (78%) favor more computer and laboratory supplies in schools (American Association of School Administrators, January 1993).

The emerging debate over communications technologies can grab the attention and imagination of the American public if it is a broader discussion of services in the public interest, not just entertainment services. A majority (54%) have a favorable view of the term "multimedia" (Wall Street Journal/NBC News Poll, January 1994) and two-thirds (63%) find the possibilities of the new multimedia services to be exciting (MCI).

At the same time, people worry about how the coming together of different technologies may hurt consumers. A majority (55%) believe that mergers between telephone and cable companies will hurt consumers because it will concentrate power in just a few companies. Only 38% believe that mergers will help because they will make more options available (WSJ/NBC). This is where the government comes in.

Government Should Act

Americans clearly want government to have an active role in the emerging debate over communications technologies. That is the resounding message of a telephone survey of 1,000 likely voters chosen at random to be representative of the American electorate. They want government to be a leader in helping these technologies evolve, in ensuring universal access, and in keeping the public interest uses of the new communications technologies in the forefront. They support a variety of actions on behalf of the public interest, from government grants to corporate donations.

Government should lead in helping these technologies evolve

When people approach the new communications technologies in focus groups, they frequently assume they should be thinking about entertainment functions—a mostly private, not public, realm in their minds. Their attitudes shift when they focus on the public interest arena, such as education and health care applications.

In the survey, an attempt was made to demonstrate the power of the education issue in determining people's attitudes toward an activist government. By giving half the respondents educational examples in the introduction to questions about government's role, and giving the other half no such example, the intention was

to see whether a context of educational applications would translate into more support for an activist government. It did, particularly in the area of access. It increased peoples' support for government information to help teach people about the technology (+14 percentage points when given an educational context), to set costs (+9 points), and to ensure a nationwide system accessible to everyone (+5 points). It made little difference in other areas.

The most popular government actions all have a public benefit

Most important, all the education and public-interest-related options tested are at the top of peoples' responses. With or without an educational cue, the three most popular government actions are all actions that mention a public benefit. (Unless otherwise noted, all figures given here are the combined responses with and without the educational cue.)

Keeping the public interest at the forefront

Government should help make new technologies available

The public is most enthusiastic about government actions that will assist technological advancements in the public interest, such as education and health care uses. By a wide margin, people favor government grants to help communities and nonprofit groups make new technologies available in schools, libraries, and hospitals (77% support, 18% oppose).

and support programs that children and adults can use from home

People also favor having the government support education programs that adults can use from home over a computer or two-way television—or that children can use to help them with their homework (70% support, 25% oppose). "I have a son who always struggles with math," a white collar man suggested in a focus group, "and I always look for these programs to help him at home, and I think they would be ideal for the schools." Furthermore, they feel that this could fit into their stretched lives: "I think we could do more at home, and it would save time maybe in traveling" (pink collar woman).

In addition, people support a public-private partnership to promote the community and public interest, and they respond to the spirit of corporate responsibility for the community that encourages corporate donations to community organizations. The respondents firmly support having the government require companies

that profit from these technologies to dedicate a part of their resources to supporting community uses, such as health information, educational services for schools and libraries, and access to government information (76% support, 18% oppose).

Ensuring universality—access, knowledge, and cost

People support efforts to ensure universal access and overcome all three barriers—access, knowledge, and cost. They want a system that will be accessible to everyone. They want to share the knowledge people will need to use that system. And they want to keep costs low so everyone can afford it.

A system accessible to everyone

In the true spirit of democracy, respondents like the idea of a system that every American will be able to use. They favor the government's ensuring that a nationwide information system will be accessible to everyone in every part of the country (67% support, 26% oppose). In the public's mind, the information highway is the new public infrastructure.

A system every American can use

In addition to ensuring that the system is accessible, voters also favor the government's taking an active role in helping people learn about the new technologies. They know that "people without education won't be able to use it" (white collar man). They favor having the government provide information to teach people about what the new technologies are and about how to use them (64% support, 31% oppose). This helps address their personal fears of being left behind. "What scares me is I don't have enough brains to keep up with it," confessed one blue collar man. "I do not know anything about a fax machine. I've never had a computer." A white collar man said, "Now in business, I need them [computers] very much, and I know it was just a big mental block to get into it. I just want to get caught up. You can't get behind."

"What scares me is I don't have enough brains to keep up with it."

The public also favors—by a strong, though smaller, 20-point margin—government actions to set costs for services cheap enough for just about everyone to afford (56% support, 36% oppose). Not surprisingly, people are willing to control costs by a stronger margin (25 percentage points, compared with 14 points)

Set costs cheap enough for everyone to afford

in the context of education. Americans are somewhat reluctant to control private prices, but they are willing to set controls on what they see as public goods.

Technology can widen or close the gaps

Americans believe we are a society divided by wealth, and technology only tends to widen the gap. As one white collar woman in a focus group said, "I think it [technology] will split society into haves and have-nots. We already have that sort of thing based on economy right now, but it will be a further split. Like, say small business, the small business that can afford the technology and learn it will probably do very well, leaving back in the dust the small business that can't keep up with the technology."

Because people do not want to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots, they support government's taking an active role in making these services universal by addressing issues of access, knowledge, and cost.

Paying now for tomorrow

Cost: a dividing line

Cost is a dividing line for many respondents. There are some areas in which people are willing to invest, even if it means money out of their pocket. And there are other areas in which they are not willing to spend.

A willingness to sacrifice for education

Education is one area that people are willing to sacrifice for "if they guarantee that what you are going to give me is going to go towards that education" (pink collar woman). More than three-quarters (78%) of Americans in an earlier survey favor more computer and laboratory supplies in schools, even if it increases their income taxes (American Association of School Administrators, January 1993). Updating classrooms is one of the primary goals people list when talking about reforming education.

...but not to fund technology blindly

The desire to invest in public interest applications does not, however, translate into a willingness to fund technological advancement blindly. People are reluctant to spend money today for tomorrow's new technologies if it means helping companies that will make profits in the future. By a 25-point margin, they oppose the idea of allowing telephone, cable, and other communi-

cations companies to raise subscriber rates today to enable them to invest in services for the future (33% support, 58% oppose). Those most strongly opposed to this suggestion are homemakers (oppose by a 40-point margin), older women (oppose by 38 points), voters over 50 (by 38 points), college educated women (by 37 points), and Republican women (by 36 points).

Don't raise rates for possible future services

This split goes back to the core difference between entertainment and education. When people in the focus groups spoke about new technologies and controlling cost, the examples they gave were in entertainment. Movies on demand and home shopping are not things everyone needs to have access to, so people did not feel it necessary to control costs. Most important, people have a general ideological view that the market should control private enterprise and that communications technologies are still part of private enterprise.

Let the market control private enterprise in entertainment

They feel differently when technology moves to the necessities or actions already within the public arena—education, for example. "If we're talking about regulating telephone prices or your gas and electric bill, well, OK, that makes some sense because people would freeze to death in the winter," said a white collar man. Education is one necessity that is viewed as already being within the realm of government. It is a critical issue, according to focus group participants—key to their children's future and to the economy. "If they're going to make anything of themselves at all," a blue collar man stated, "they are going to have to have a lot of education." Furthermore, people perceive a gap in education now that they feel to be a result of income. Technology has the potential to close or widen this gap, and people are sensitive to that.

...but have more government involvement in education

So, paying for services is the key debate among policymakers as well as the public. The debate goes beyond the "any pocketbook but mine" mentality. People do not want to pay now for services they may or may not see at some point in the future. But they are willing to invest in areas of direct public benefit. Still, some significant research remains to be done to understand how, and for what purposes, Americans are willing to pay.

Invest in areas of direct public benefit

Different constituencies

All constituencies support an active government role

There is broad, consistent support for an activist government in the arena of communications technologies. For nearly every question in the survey, and every demographic group, there are large margins of support for an active government role. Even Republican men, who typically want the least government intervention, support providing grants to make technology available (by a 42-point margin), requiring some profits to go to nonprofits (favor by 28 points), ensuring a nationwide system accessible to all (by 27 points), government support for education at home (by 25 points), and teaching about new technologies (by 13 points). Like respondents overall, they oppose rate hikes for future services (Republican men oppose such hikes by a 16-point margin, and respondents overall by 24 points).

They disagree only on cost control

The line that divides the public is cost control. As already seen, people favor having the government set affordable costs by a 20-point margin. The strongest supporters for having the government set affordable costs are women (by a 28-point margin), particularly working women (by 32 points), younger women (by 38 points), women without a college education (by 39 points), people under 30 (by 44 points), people with no more than a high school degree (by 39 points), African Americans (by 46 points), liberals (by 44 points), Democrats (by 43 points), and voters in the Northeast (by 35 points). But a few groups oppose this idea: college educated men (oppose by a 13-point margin), younger college educated voters (by 6 points), Republican men (by 16 points), conservative Republicans (by 12 points), and Bush voters (by 8 points).

Some groups more enthusiastic than others

Although people across the spectrum favor an activist government in the new communications technologies arena, some groups are more enthusiastic than others. Groups that, on average, more strongly favor the suggested government roles include working women, people under 30, younger women, people with a high school education, men without a college education, younger people without a college education, liberals, Democrats, particularly Democratic men, Clinton voters, African Americans, and people in the Northeast.

Importantly, blue collar men are also surprisingly interested in

this issue. The blue collar workers who are particularly activated in this issue are, by and large, younger. Other research shows that they are partial to technology and worried about their own job skills and their children's education. They also are particularly supportive of a government role in education and of policies that make technologies more broadly available.

Blue collar workers among the most enthusiastic

At the opposite end of the spectrum, senior citizens are among the least enthusiastic—as are Bush voters, conservative Republicans, and older college educated people. These groups are cost-sensitive and in general resist big government. Seniors also seem significantly less engaged in new technologies and the information highway.

Seniors among the least

Communications in the health care debate

As the health care reform plan advances, there is a real opportunity to bring issues of communications technology forward. Advances in information technology can go a long way to reduce administrative costs and paperwork, which the Administration has targeted as a key goal of health care reform. Three-quarters of Americans think reducing paperwork is a convincing reason to support health care reform and believe that reducing paperwork could significantly reduce health care costs.

On the positive side, people see health care as an important issue that should be universal. "Money should never stand in the way of seeing a doctor," a pink collar woman stressed. The flip side, however, is that people do not readily translate their health care concerns to information technologies. They talk about preventive care and universal access, but not in terms of information—they feel they have enough information now. People confuse medical advances and communications advances. They feel that medical advances are critical but that communications advances in the medical field, by contrast, seem gimmicky and unnecessary. This issue of the public's understanding of what the information superhighway can contribute to health care reform is clearly an area that needs more research.

Communications Policy Working Papers

#1 Beyond Universal Service: Characteristics of Americans without Telephones, 1980–1993

Jorge Reina Schement, Denise Anderson, and *Susan Peters,* Department of Communications, School of Communications, Information and Library Studies, Rutgers University

#2 Universal Service: The Rural Challenge Changing Requirements and Policy Options

Heather Hudson, Director, Telecommunications Management and Policy Program, McLaren School of Business, University of San Francisco

#3 Universal Service: Policy Options for the Future

Susan G. Hadden, Professor, LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin

#4 Recovering Network Subsidies without Distortion

Michael L. Einhorn, Economist, Antitrust Division, U.S. Department of Justice

#5 Funding the Public Telecommunications Infrastructure

Bruce L. Egan, Columbia Institute for Tele-Information, Columbia University, and *Steven Wildman,* Associate Professor, Department of Communications Studies and Director, Program in Telecommunications Science, Management and Policy, Northwestern University

#6 NetTrans Accounts: Reforming the Financial Support Structure for Universal Service in Telecommunications

Eli M. Noam, Professor of Finance and Economics and Director, Columbia Institute for Tele-Information, Columbia University

#7 Interactive Television Testbeds

Peter Kruskovsky

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